

## Helen Keller in a Young Israel, by Justin Gardner



The 1948 creation of the State of Israel was something that fascinated Helen Keller. As Lash states in his biography, Keller was a lifelong student of the bible who believed its words to be history. Never one to keep controversial opinions to herself, a 1937 Journal entry of Helen's stated "I have long felt that their problem can be solved only if they have a homeland where they can develop unmolested their peculiar genius in religion, art, and social justice... the Jews held the land long before an Arab invader appeared... What have the Arabs done to develop Palestine?" Helen's one-time friend and biographer, Nella Brady, later wrote that "Helen had always been much interested in the Zionists and has Never seen that there is an Arab side to the question."

Artist Jo Davidson had already sent his friend Helen a letter from the new State, to which she replied "My travels through the world would indeed be incomplete unless I breathed the air of that land tiny in bulk but spiritually mighty." Davidson committed to getting Helen and her assistant Polly Thomson to Israel, going to the very top to ensure their visit while she was already traveling overseas. "Be sure to cable me when Helen Keller is in Paris," Israeli Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion had said to Davidson, "and I myself will invite them." The US State Department asked that her trip be broadened to include Egypt, Lebanon, Syria and Jordan. After traveling to Cairo, Beirut, Damascus, and Amman, Helen Keller and Polly Thomson entered Jerusalem through the Mandelbaum Gate Frontier on May 19, 1952.

The pair's [itinerary](#) included dining with (then labor minister) [Golda Meir](#) and tea with Prime Minister Ben-Gurion. Helen visited several kibbutzim and institutions for people who were deaf and blind, one of which was called the "Village for the Blind." The Village had been where all families that included a member who was blind were evacuated to from Europe after the Second World War. Helen was upset

with the idea, and insisted that "They should be trained for membership of normal society and not as a society of handicapped persons. You must break up that Village." The Israelis took her advice, and did exactly that. "That is why the pros in my field respected her," said AFB President Robert Barnett, "she had a philosophy about the treatment of the blind and fought for it."